

Keatingrove Farms strives to provide healthy foods to all neighbors

By **ANNA SCHUMANN**

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The love that Carole Keating feels for her farm is matched only by the joy she feels in sharing her passion with others.

Keating has lived on a 60-acre farm on Park Road off FM 2920 for 30 years. She and her husband purchased the property after he surveyed soil on lands in northern Harris and southern Montgomery counties. He sought land that was ideal for growing pecan trees.

What Keating found after her husband died unexpectedly six years ago, is that the land is ideal for growing many other things as well.

After her husband's death, Keating said she thought long and hard about what it meant to be a good steward of what she'd been given.

Her long-time friend Susan White encouraged her to read a Barbara Kingsolver book, "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life."

The book tells the story of a woman who decided to live off her land entirely for one year.

Keating said she still remembers where she was the moment she finished reading the book. She immediately called White and said, "Susan, that's it. Let's do it. Let's turn this into an organic farm."

Kingsolver's book, combined with White's fascination with the movement to eat locally-grown foods, sealed the deal for them with one condition, White said: they must have fun.

"We are having a ball," she said.

Since the two had always planned to grow organically, there was never a question that they would strive for organic certification.

Keatingrove Farms received its USDA organic certification a year-and-a-half ago and is the only certified organic farm in Harris County.

"A lot of people grow organically, but that's a pretty loose term," White said. "We wanted to set the standard with certification. Only organic materials go into the land. The soil is never treated by chemicals. The soil is fed organically, by black manure from cows that were fed organically. (Inspectors) can trace chemicals pretty far back."

To maintain its certification, the farm is inspected annually.

Should a pest problem arise in a farm where pesticides aren't used, likely, they'll just get rid of the plant. One or two pests won't hurt anyone though, White said.

"You might get a worm in your corn," she said. "That's a natural habitat. If there isn't a worm in your corn, you can bet insecticides were used."

Because of the difficulties in attaining and maintaining organic certification, and because they can see on a daily basis the good they do, the pair couldn't be more proud.

They sell at their own marketplace at Park Road and FM 2920 8 a.m. to noon every Wednesday and the first, third and fifth Saturdays of every month, and also at the Tomball Farmer's Market from 8 a.m. to noon the second and fourth Saturdays of each month.

"I love selling fresh foods to our neighbors and getting to meet new people," White said.

Their markets are frequented by cancer patients and other people with health issues that limit what they can eat. The markets are also frequented by people who just want to eat clean, healthy, local food.

At the June 12 market, they sold out of roughly 100 pounds of blackberries, and needed more than one tent for the fresh, hand-picked that morning, tomatoes, zucchini, squash, potatoes and onions they were selling.

"Our success shows people are always hungry for good food- locally-grown, organic, delicious food," White said. "And I can't tell you how good it feels to be able to provide that."

The more people learn about their food and how it is grown, the more people begin to realize the importance of locally-grown and organic foods, Keating said.

"The average tomato on your salad at a restaurant traveled 1,200 miles before it got to your plate," she said. "It spent its youth in a dark crate."

Keating and White are the first to admit they haven't done this alone. The pair co-manage the farm operations, but they said they couldn't do anything without their "miracle grower" Ruben Sanchez, and the help of Joaquin Torres and Cathy Cannon.

But their most important partner remains the earth.

"There are a bunch of things we are very eager students of," Keating said. "It's learning about the plants themselves, learning about the plants in the context of the soil we have and in the context of the weather we have. There's a lot we don't know."

For more information on the farm, go to www.keatingrovesfarms.com/

For more information on the Tomball farmers market, go to www.tomballfarmersmarket.org



Carole Keating, left, and Susan White, right, run Keatingrove Farms, the only certified organic farm in Harris County. They sell their fruits and vegetables at their own market and at the Tomball farmers market, which is the second and fourth Saturday of each month.

